



Negotiating the Ideal: Women, Body Image, and the Sociocultural Gaze in Beth Henley's *Miss Firecracker Contest*, Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room*, and Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig*

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Abstract

This study investigates the profound examination of female body image and the constraining influence of the sociocultural gaze within three pivotal American plays: Beth Henley's *The Miss Firecracker Contest* (1979), Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room* (1994), and Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig* (2004). Employing a feminist theoretical perspective grounded in the notions of the male gaze and disciplinary social power, this analysis contends that these works serve as dramatic laboratories, illustrating the severe psychological and social repercussions of dominant beauty ideals. While Henley's play delves into the internalization of these ideals within a Southern pageant culture, Loomer utilizes a transhistorical satire to critique the medicalization of the female form. Conversely, LaBute explicitly addresses the interpersonal dynamics of fatphobia and the societal condemnation of interbody relationships. Collectively, these plays constitute a formidable tripartite critique, revealing how the female body remains a contested arena where identity is shaped under the unyielding pressure of external scrutiny.

Keywords: *Sociocultural Gaze, Feminism, Fatphobia, Beth Henley, Lisa Loomer.*

التفاوض على المثالية: النساء، صورة الجسد، والنظرة الاجتماعية الثقافية في مسابقة الانسة فاير كراكر
لبيث هنلي، غرفة الانتظار لليزا لومر، والخنزيرة البدينة لنيل لابيوت

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ملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الفحص العميق لصورة الجسد الأنثوي والتأثير المقيد للنظرة الاجتماعية الثقافية ضمن ثلاث مسرحيات أمريكية محورية: مسابقة ملكة الجمال للكاتبه بيبث هنلي (1979)، غرفة الانتظار للكاتبه ليزا لومر (1994)، والخنزيرة البدينة للكاتب نيل لابيوت (2004). باستخدام منظور نظري نسوي قائم على مفهومي النظرة الذكورية والقوة الاجتماعية التأديبية، يجادل هذا التحليل بأن هذه الأعمال تعمل كمختبرات درامية، توضح العواقب النفسية والاجتماعية الشديدة للمثل الجمالية السائدة. بينما تتعمق مسرحية هينلي في استيعاب هذه المثالية ضمن ثقافة مسابقات الجمال الجنوبية، تستخدم لومر سخرية عبر التاريخ لنقد طبية الشكل الأنثوي. على العكس من ذلك، يتناول لابيوت بشكل صريح الديناميكيات البينية للرهاب من السمعة والإدانة المجتمعية للعلاقات بين الأجساد. مجتمعة، تشكل هذه المسرحيات نقداً ثلاثياً قوياً، يكشف كيف يظل الجسم الأنثوي ساحة متنازع عليها حيث تتشكل الهوية تحت الضغط القاسي للتمحيص الخارجي.



الكلمات المفتاحية: النظرة الاجتماعية الثقافية، النسوية، رهاب السمنة، بيت هنلي، ليزا لومر.

1- Introduction: The Stage as a Mirror

The theatre has historically functioned as a powerful platform for the critique of societal norms, with the female body being one of its most examined topics. The late 20th and early 21st centuries experienced a surge of dramatic works that directly challenge the harmful ideologies surrounding women's bodies, advancing beyond simple representation to active critique. This paper investigates three such plays—Beth Henley's *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room*, and Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig*—as interconnected critiques of the 'sociocultural gaze.' This concept broadens Laura Mulvey's foundational idea of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975) to include the extensive, pervasive system of judgment imposed by society as a whole, which includes other women, and which disciplines and penalizes bodies that stray from the idealized standard (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993).

Each play employs unique dramatic techniques to reveal the workings of this gaze. Henley examines the internalization of beauty myths within a specific regional and cultural framework. Loomer employs satire and absurdism to contextualize and medicalize the issue, connecting historical and contemporary practices of body modification. LaBute adopts a harsh, hyper-realistic approach to analyze the social stigma associated with fatness and the cowardice of those who yield to it. By analyzing these plays collectively, this paper argues that live theatre offers a distinctive, visceral medium for audiences to observe and contemplate the harmful impacts of the sociocultural gaze, transforming the private anguish of body image into a public, and therefore political, concern.

2- Literature Review

The female body has long been a site of contention, subjected to rigorous examination and a constantly evolving array of aesthetic ideals. In modern Western societies, this examination is intensified by omnipresent media, societal expectations, and deeply rooted social norms that dictate what is deemed beautiful, desirable, and even 'acceptable.' Women find themselves in a continuous and intricate negotiation between their internal self-image and the external sociocultural scrutiny, which often enforces narrow and frequently unrealistic beauty standards. This literature review investigates the diverse ways in which Beth Henley's *Miss Firecracker Contest*, Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room*, and Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig* shed light on this struggle, illustrating women's efforts to navigate, resist, or conform to prevailing body image ideals.



The historical evolution of beauty standards showcases a dynamic interaction between power, gender, and consumer culture. Naomi Wolf's influential work, *The Beauty Myth* (1991), posits that beauty is neither universal nor fixed, but rather a social construct employed to control women, redirecting their energy from social and political progress towards perpetual self-enhancement. Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) further expands on how cultural anxieties—such as those related to consumption, control, and gender roles—are inscribed upon women's bodies, resulting in widespread body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. These foundational texts provide a critical framework for comprehending the historical and systemic pressures that influence women's body image.

At the heart of this negotiation lies the notion of the sociocultural gaze, an omnipresent external evaluation that influences self-image. Drawing from John Berger's seminal work, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which intricately examines how images—especially those of women—are crafted for viewing, the sociocultural gaze includes the scrutinizing perspectives of media, peers, partners, and even healthcare providers. Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) underscores the manner in which individuals enact their identities, perpetually conscious of how they are perceived by others. This ongoing awareness, particularly among women, fosters an intensified self-consciousness regarding physical appearance, frequently leading to endeavors to manage and alter their bodies to conform to idealized representations promoted by advertising and popular culture (Kilbourne, 1999).

Beth Henley's *Miss Firecracker Contest* (1984) introduces Carnelle Scott, a young woman who is eager to secure victory in a local beauty pageant as a means of achieving redemption and acceptance. Carnelle's historical reputation and perceived physical imperfections fuel her intense yearning for external affirmation, epitomizing the challenge of reshaping oneself in accordance with an external standard. Her efforts to refine her body and identity for the contest illustrate a profound desire for societal validation, even as the absurdity and superficiality of the pageant underscore the arbitrary essence of the 'ideal.' Patterson (2014) observes that Henley's earlier works frequently showcase characters 'negotiating identity,' a struggle that is vividly illustrated in Carnelle's pursuit of a beauty title to validate her very existence.

Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room* (1996) provides a sharp critique of the medicalization of the female body and the extremes to which women will go to fit societal norms. The play unites women from various historical contexts, all bound by their quest for bodily perfection through surgical means, ranging from chest



binding to breast augmentation and even foot reconstruction. Loomer expertly exposes how medical discourse and cosmetic surgery become instruments of the sociocultural gaze, transforming women's desires into perceived necessities. As Karen Davis (2003) argues in *Dubious Equalities and Embodied Differences*, cosmetic surgery, rather than liberating women, often reinforces harmful beauty standards by promising an illusory path to self-acceptance through physical alteration.

At the heart of this negotiation lies the notion of the sociocultural gaze, an omnipresent external evaluation that influences self-image. Drawing from John Berger's seminal work, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which thoroughly examines how images—especially those of women—are crafted for viewing, the sociocultural gaze includes the scrutinizing perspectives of media and peers. Neil LaBute's play, *Fat Pig* (2004), directly addresses the harshness embedded in societal judgments regarding body size. The narrative focuses on the dynamic between Tom and Helen, a self-assured and intelligent woman who is overweight. Tom grapples with the challenge of reconciling his authentic attraction to Helen with his ingrained anxiety about societal condemnation—especially from his friends and colleagues—demonstrating the influence of the sociocultural gaze. Cahill (2007) posits that LaBute's work "reveals the vulnerability of male identity when faced with a woman who challenges traditional beauty norms," while simultaneously exposing the severe public shaming mechanisms that uphold a narrow ideal. Although Helen is portrayed as confident, she ultimately faces the harsh truth that, for many, her body size eclipses all other attributes.

These plays, despite their varied contexts and styles, consistently depict the immense pressure on women to conform to an aesthetic ideal. They illustrate that the negotiation process is not solely internal but profoundly relational, shaped by partners, family, friends, and the wider public environment. From Carnelle's frantic attempt to enter a pageant to the surgical alterations depicted in *The Waiting Room* and Helen's public humiliation in *Fat Pig*, the characters' journeys highlight the psychological burden of body dissatisfaction and the often crippling quest for acceptance in a society that glorifies a particular, frequently unattainable, physical standard. This relentless pursuit of the ideal, as noted by Faludi (1991), can represent a "backlash" against female independence and self-definition.

Furthermore, the theatrical medium itself acts as a potent lens for scrutinizing these matters. By showcasing relatable characters who wrestle with concrete expressions of body image anxiety and societal scrutiny, these plays urge audiences to confront their own prejudices and ingrained beauty ideals. The intimate essence of live theatre facilitates a direct connection with the characters' vulnerability and



strength, nurturing empathy and critical contemplation. The playwrights employ dialogue, character evolution, and dramatic tension to unveil the layers of superficiality, revealing the human toll associated with the quest for the 'ideal' body.

When comparing the approaches of the playwrights, recurring themes surface regarding the omnipresent nature of the sociocultural gaze, yet their critiques take different paths. Henley's Southern Gothic allure offers a bittersweet perspective on personal redemption within a flawed system. Loomer utilizes satire and an intergenerational viewpoint to analyze the medical-industrial complex's influence on body modification. LaBute, known for his stark realism, removes the facades to highlight raw social cruelty and hypocrisy. Throughout these diverse dramatic landscapes, the central theme remains constant: women are perpetually negotiating their self-worth against an external ideal, frequently amidst judgment, pressure, or the temptation of unattainable perfection.

In summary, Beth Henley's Miss Firecracker Contest, Lisa Loomer's The Waiting Room, and Neil LaBute's Fat Pig collectively present a compelling dramatic investigation into the complex relationship between women, body image, and the sociocultural gaze. Through their unique narratives and characters, these plays illuminate the significant psychological, emotional, and social repercussions of existing under relentless aesthetic scrutiny. They emphasize the ongoing battle women encounter in their quest for validation, challenging expectations, or tragically succumbing to ideals that often diminish their inherent value. Ultimately, these works of theatre serve as crucial cultural commentaries, urging audiences to critically examine the origins and implications of beauty standards that continue to shape, and often constrain, the lives of women.

3- Significance of the Study and the Purposes

This research investigates the intricate relationship between women, body image, and the sociocultural gaze as depicted in three modern American plays: Beth Henley's Miss Firecracker Contest, Lisa Loomer's The Waiting Room, and Neil LaBute's Fat Pig. By analyzing these texts through the frameworks of feminist theory and critical body studies, this study aims to reveal how women are positioned, objectified, and evaluated based on societal beauty norms, and how these narratives both reflect and resist prevailing discourses regarding femininity and embodiment.



In particular, the research emphasizes the representation of women's challenges with body image and self-worth, alongside the intersection of these concerns with themes of identity, power, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships. Through meticulous textual analysis, the study seeks to uncover patterns and motifs in the portrayal of female bodies and the sociocultural gaze, as well as to assess the theatrical techniques utilized by the playwrights to either critique or uphold these ideals.

Ultimately, the objective of this research is to enrich ongoing academic discussions about the politics of representation in contemporary theatre and the influence of these narratives on audience perceptions of women and their bodies. By exploring the complex interactions between gender, embodiment, and sociocultural expectations, this study aims to illuminate how these plays both mirror and contest dominant ideologies, while also considering the potential of theatre to promote critical engagement with and resistance to detrimental beauty standards.

4- Theoretical Framework: The Disciplinary Gaze

The examination is rooted in feminist and sociological frameworks that perceive body image not as an individual deficiency but rather as a consequence of societal regulation. Central to this discussion is Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, which functions through continuous surveillance and normalization (Foucault, 1977). Individuals assimilate this gaze, transforming into self-regulating subjects: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself" (Foucault, 1977, p. 202-203).

Feminist theorists have directly related this to the experiences of women. Sandra Lee Bartky contends that the female body is subjected to "disciplinary practices" designed to achieve a specific "script" of femininity—characteristics such as thinness, grace, and a certain standard of beauty (Bartky, 1990). Susan Bordo, in her work *Unbearable Weight*, further analyzes how these practices reflect cultural anxieties surrounding gender, race, and class, and how eating disorders can be seen as logical, albeit extreme, reactions to these societal pressures (Bordo, 1993). This internalized surveillance engenders what objectification theorists refer to as "self-objectification," wherein women learn to perceive their own bodies from a critical third-person viewpoint, resulting in increased body shame and anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Theatre serves as an optimal medium to portray this phenomenon. The audience becomes complicit in the gaze, compelled to confront their own involvement in



sustaining these standards as they observe characters being scrutinized, judged, and ultimately shattered by them.

5- Beth Henley's *The Miss Firecracker Contest*: The Internalized Gaze in the Southern Pageant

Set in the quaint town of Brookhaven, Mississippi, Beth Henley's tragicomedy centers on Carnelle Scott as she fervently prepares for the local Miss Firecracker Contest. Known pejoratively as "Miss Hot Tamale" due to a past scandal, Carnelle views the pageant as her final opportunity for redemption and societal acceptance. Her entire self-worth is projected outward, reliant on securing a crown and gaining the approval of her community.

The sociocultural scrutiny in Henley's work is encapsulated by the pageant itself—a ritualistic event where female bodies are assessed and valued according to a restrictive standard of beauty, talent, and grace. Carnelle has completely absorbed this scrutiny. She rehearses her walk, smile, and talent (a patriotic baton twirling act) with frantic urgency, convinced that this performance can erase her "tainted" reputation and affirm her existence. Her cousins, Elain and Popeye, illustrate two contrasting responses to this system. Elain, a former winner who epitomizes the ideal, is stifled by its vacuity, while Popeye, an unconventional outsider, largely exists beyond its influence and provides Carnelle with a model of unconditional, non-judgmental friendship.

Henley critiques the pageant not by trivializing it, but by revealing its significant psychological impact. Carnelle's journey is portrayed with profound empathy. Her defeat—placing last—marks a moment of deep crisis, yet also signals the onset of potential liberation. In the aftermath, divested of the ostentatious costume and the aspiration for pageant success, she must confront her identity beyond the sociocultural scrutiny. The play's ambiguous conclusion hints at a flicker of hope that she may, like Popeye, learn to derive value on her own terms, exemplifying what scholars identify as the intricate negotiation between conformity and resistance within patriarchal frameworks (Austin, 1990; Stephens, 1999).

6- Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room*: The Medicalized and Historicized Gaze

Lisa Loomer's darkly satirical play, *The Waiting Room*, adopts a broader and more straightforward perspective. It unites three women from distinct centuries within a contemporary doctor's waiting area: Forgiveness From Heaven, a 19th-century Chinese woman with bound feet; Victoria, a Victorian Englishwoman enduring the



repercussions of a corset-laced waist; and Wanda, a 20th-century American woman confronting breast cancer potentially associated with her breast implants. This transhistorical concept effectively argues that while the instruments of bodily discipline may evolve, the oppressive scrutiny demanding female conformity remains unchanged.

Loomer explicitly medicalizes the sociocultural gaze, illustrating how the realms of medicine and science have historically been appropriated to uphold beauty standards. The doctor's office transforms into a panopticon where female suffering is diagnosed and "treated" in manners that often further align the body with societal expectations. For Forgiveness, the physician recommends amputation; for Victoria, a hysterectomy is suggested for "hysteria"; for Wanda, the male doctors dismiss her worries regarding the safety of her implants. Their afflictions are directly linked to their efforts to adhere to the beauty ideals of their respective cultures—tiny feet, a wasp waist, and ample breasts.

The play compellingly illustrates that the gaze transcends mere aesthetics, embodying profound political and economic implications. As Wanda articulates, "It's about money. It's about power. It's about keeping us in our place" (Loomer, 1994, p. 25). Loomer connects the exploitation of the female body to global capitalism and patriarchal dominance, a relationship critically examined in feminist analyses of the beauty-industrial complex (Wolf, 1991; Jeffreys, 2005). The communal waiting room evolves into a site of solidarity where the women come to understand that their struggles are intertwined. Their collective rebellion at the end of the play is a direct assault on the medical establishment that has perpetuated their suffering, offering a vision of resistance rooted in shared experience and defiance against the disciplinary institutions themselves.

7- Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig*: The Interpersonal Gaze and the Stigma of Fat

Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig* focuses on a modern, urban professional environment to examine one of the most significant contemporary taboos: fatness. The narrative revolves around Tom, a moderately attractive and conventional businessman, who encounters and falls in love with Helen, an intelligent, self-assured, and plus-sized librarian. Their relationship is fated to fail from the outset, not due to their own emotions, but because of the unyielding and harsh pressure exerted by the sociocultural gaze, as represented by Tom's friends and colleagues, Carter and Jeannie.

LaBute's brilliance lies in his ability to make the audience complicit. We observe the charming, developing romance between Tom and Helen, only to be compelled



to sit with Tom as Carter unleashes vicious fatphobic comments and Jeannie—a slender coworker envious of Tom’s affections—utilizes passive-aggressive concern to erode his self-esteem. The gaze is not merely an abstract concept; it is personified in the individuals we collaborate with, socialize with, and regard as friends. Tom’s ultimate inability to defend Helen and his choice to end their relationship at the very public beach—a venue where bodies are prominently displayed—serves as a poignant critique of male cowardice and the overwhelming influence of social conformity.

The play serves as a stark critique of weight stigma, which Puhl and Heuer (2009) identify as a widespread form of social discrimination with significant psychological and physical repercussions. Tom’s journey illustrates that even authentic affection cannot easily dismantle the internalized fatphobia and social anxiety ingrained by societal norms. Conversely, Helen is not a mere victim. She possesses a keen awareness of the scrutiny directed at her and foresees Tom’s betrayal, stating, “People aren’t meant to be with people who look like me” (LaBute, 2004, p. 86). Her tragic awareness endows her with a dignity that Tom completely lacks. Fat Pig posits that the sociocultural gaze is so potent that it can actively obstruct love and intimacy, regulating not only individual bodies but also the connections between them (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009).

8- Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

Although differing in tone and style, *Miss Firecracker Contest*, *The Waiting Room*, and *Fat Pig* collectively create a significant continuum of critique. Henley illustrates the internalization of the gaze and the arduous journey toward self-definition within a localized cultural ritual. Loomer contextualizes and radicalizes the issue, revealing the systemic and institutional forces that govern bodily discipline while advocating for collective resistance. LaBute focuses on the micro-aggressions present in interpersonal relationships, showcasing how the gaze functions in daily life to uphold norms and penalize transgressions.

Together, these works unveil the complex nature of the sociocultural gaze: it is both internal and external, historical and contemporary, institutional and personal. They all arrive at the conclusion that striving for an external ideal is a futile endeavor that results in pain, alienation, and the disintegration of the self. Nevertheless, each play offers a distinct note of hope or resistance: Carnelle’s potential for self-acceptance following failure, the united rebellion of the three women in *The Waiting Room*, and Helen’s steadfast self-possession in the face of rejection.



These plays remain critically relevant. In a time characterized by social media filters, influencer culture, and rising instances of body dysmorphia and eating disorders (Saunders & Frazier, 2017), the sociocultural gaze is more widespread and insidious than ever before. Theatre, as a live and embodied art form, continues to serve as a vital space for addressing these uncomfortable realities. By placing the scrutinized body on stage and compelling the audience to confront its suffering, these plays do not merely depict a problem—they urge us to acknowledge our role within it and, ultimately, to challenge the very gaze they so vividly illustrate.

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